

# Debate Champions

## 9 Steps to Organizing Great ESL Debates

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Whether you're a hard-hitting public speaker, a shrinking violet, or just someone hoping to gain a little insight, debates are a terrific ESL practice opportunity.



They involve [all of the four central skills](#) - speaking, listening, reading and writing - and include a positive element of competition, as well as encouraging the critical thinking and personal confidence which will do wonders for our students in years to come. But organizing a debate isn't easy, and getting the best out of this opportunity takes some planning. Here are some tips for creating debates in which everyone can participate, and which all of your students will enjoy.

### Plan and Organize a Perfect Debate Lesson

#### 1 Info in Advance

**Make sure everyone knows what's going on.** Debate formats vary widely around the world, and you need to be sure your students know what to expect, so that [the debate goes smoothly](#), without too much procedural complication. I hand out a simple sheet of debate rules, which include:

1. **The debate title.** I follow the rules of the Oxford University Debating Society, which frames every debate as a statement: "This house believes that fox hunting should be banned"; or, "This house believes that aliens exist".
2. **The teams.** These are organized into 'For' and 'Against'. Each team's task is to persuade the teacher (or audience, if you can find one) to vote for their point of view. I recommend no larger than six or seven students per team.
3. **The structure.** The two teams ('For' and 'Against') take turns to make points intended to sway the audience. One, two or at most three students will speak during each turn; try to ensure that there are enough turns so that each student will have the chance to speak.
4. Ensure the students know the **time limits**. If you have a 50 minute class, for example, each turn could be three minutes per team, so

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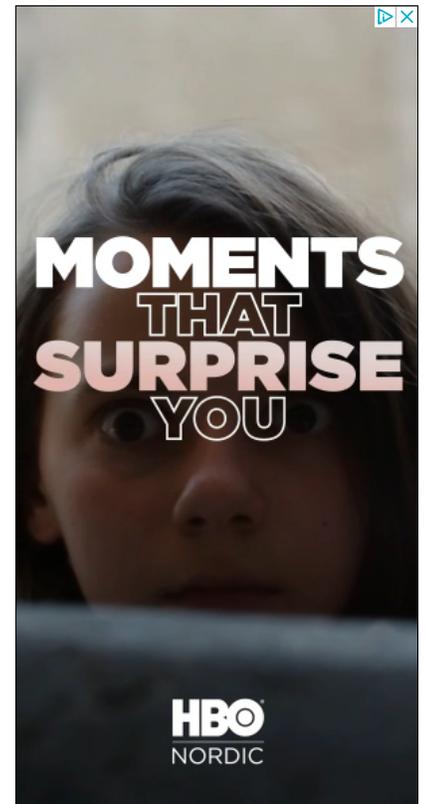
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each turn would take a little more than six minutes. If three turns are enough to give everyone a chance, this makes 18-20 minutes of debating. The remainder can be spent on preparation before the debate, voting once the debate is finished, and perhaps a more open discussion afterward.

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5. Make your **rules** very clear. Debates only work well if everyone is respectful and listens carefully.  No one else is should speak while a team is taking its turn. If the opposing team has questions or a point to make, they should note it down, but remain silent. The audience should remain silent, except if they believe a factual mistake has been made. In this special circumstance, they may raise a hand and say, 'Point of order!' before explaining the problem. Additional time should be given to the team if this happens.

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## 2 Pick Your Teams

**Make sure everyone knows what team they're on.** You could assign the teams yourself to ensure a gender balance and a good mix of levels, nationalities, etc. You could also assign team captains who will choose their team mates, but this will be rather tough on those picked last.

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## 3 Research Time

**The teams should be given plenty of time to gather information, and to form strong and persuasive arguments.** This could be during class time, or for homework, but I recommend a mix, so that the team has plenty of time to discover and share information together, as well as quiet time to build up their case.

The Internet will be their primary research tool, but do encourage them in the direction of the local library. You could recommend book titles, web pages, videos or movies which are relevant.

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## 4 Get Organized

**Once the main elements of their argument are in place, the team should organize their speakers and decide the structure of their presentation.** At this stage, tell the students how many turns they will have, so that they can assign between one and three speakers to each turn, and decide the topic focus of each speaker.

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## 5 Think Tactics

Encourage each team to make predictions as to the arguments their opponents will bring up. How can they pre-empt or undermine these arguments?

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## 6 Practice

Everything will go better if the debate itself is *not* the first time the students have expressed these points. Practice enables them to find the best vocabulary - although they should be warned that *every word* they say should be understood by *everyone else*. They should keep an eye on the clock and make sure they can express their points within the time limit.

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## 7 Let's Do This

**Whatever happens, follow the format.** The teacher can introduce the debate and remind everyone of the format and the rules. Then each team takes their turn. Make notes as you go, either as part of a [continuous assessment system](#) or just to keep track of who has made which point. Keep order and make sure everyone is paying attention and, if possible, taking notes; there is a special skill required to make brief notes on complex arguments, and it's well worth practicing.

The whole debate might look like this:

1. Teacher introduces the debate and reads the motion: "This house believes..."
  2. 'For' team - turn 1
  3. 'Against' team - turn 1
  4. 'For' team - turn 2
  5. 'Against' team - turn 2
  6. 'For' team - turn 3
  7. 'Against' team - turn 3
  8. 'For' team - final remarks, closing arguments
  9. 'Against' team - final remarks, closing arguments
  10. Voting by the audience (if you have one), or a decision by the teacher.
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## 8 Voting

If you are the sole 'voter', then your decision may well be a difficult one. Try to remain dispassionate, and to base your choice on a combination of factors:

- The level of vocabulary used
  - Accurate use of advanced structures
  - Confidence, eye contact and posture
  - How well prepared was the team? Did they use the preparation time well? Was there evidence of a variety of sources being used? Did they pre-empt their opposition's points?
  - Was the team respectful and did they follow the format correctly?
  - Most importantly, did they make *genuinely persuasive* arguments, with evidence of some originality of thought?
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## 9 Variations

You could vary the format a great deal, to suit your own class. Potential variables include:

- Questions from the moderator
  - Questions from the audience
  - A 'rebuttal' period after each turn, during which the opposing team can directly address the points just made
  - The presence of an audience
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**Consider recording the debate for later playback and analysis; this would be a great source for error correction and pronunciation work.**

I do hope you're able [to organize debates](#) for your students. They're endlessly popular and can be a positive and rigorous work-out for some essential skills; equally importantly, they're genuinely educational, and great fun.

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